

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 09493 01 OF 02 151806Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 AID-05 CEA-01 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-08
EA-10 FRB-03 INR-10 IO-13 NEA-11 NSAE-00 OPIC-03
SP-02 TRSE-00 LAB-04 SIL-01 AGRE-00 OMB-01 SS-15
DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 L-03 PA-01 NSCE-00 SSO-00
ICAE-00 INRE-00 /110 W
-----079817 151828Z /50

O 151748Z JUN 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7194
INFO ALL EC CAPITALS IMMEDIATE
AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 09493

USEEC ALSO FOR EMBASSY

USOECD

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT PGOV UK
SUBJECT: CALLAGHAN SURVIVES CONFIDENCE TEST

REF: LONDON 9405

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN'S GOVERNMENT SURVIVED
THE CONFIDENCE TEST ON THE JUNE 14 VOTE ON A TORY
MOTION TO CENSURE CHANCELLOR HEALEY BY 287 TO 282, A
GOVERNMENT MAJORITY OF 5. WHILE THE VICTORY WAS A
NARROW ONE, IT WAS COMPLETELY SATISFYING FOR CALLAGHAN.
IN OUR JUDGMENT, HIS POLITICAL POSITION IN PARLIAMENT
REMAINS STRONGER THAN THE NUMBERS ALONE MIGHT SUGGEST.
AS FOR MRS. THATCHER, WE WOULD GUESS THAT HER PLOY OF
ATTEMPTING TO CENSURE HEALEY PRODUCED UNEXPECTED
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PAGE 02 LONDON 09493 01 OF 02 151806Z

BENEFITS. NOT ONLY DID SHE SUCCEED IN MAKING THE
LIBERALS LOOK FOOLISH, BUT SHE ALSO GAVE THE GOVERNMENT
AN ANXIOUS MOMENT OR TWO AND PROBABLY LEFT THE PUBLIC
WITH THE IMPRESSION THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S PARLIAMENTARY
POSITION IS WEAKER THAN WE BELIEVE TO BE THE CASE. ON
BALANCE, HOWEVER, WE BELIEVE THE EVENTS OF JUNE 14 HAVE
INCREASED THE LIKELIHOOD OF A FALL GENERAL ELECTION.

END SUMMARY.

1. THE RESULT OF THE JUNE 14 CONFIDENCE VOTE ON THE MOTION TO CENSURE CHANCELLOR HEALEY WAS ANTICIPATED (REFTEL), THOUGH THE LIBERAL DECISION TO ABSTAIN MADE THE GOVERNMENT'S 5-VOTE MARGIN SOMEWHAT CLOSER THAN HAD BEEN EXPECTED AND CALLAGHAN WOULD HAVE LIKED. WHILE THE THREE WELSH NATIONALIST MPS ALSO ABSTAINED, THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS, TO THE SURPRISE OF MOST OBSERVERS, VOTED FOR THE MOTION WITH THE CONSERVATIVES. THE ULSTER UNIONISTS TOO VOTED AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT.

2. DESPITE THE RELATIVELY THIN MARGIN OF THE GOVERNMENT'S VICTORY, THE RESULT VINDICATED CALLAGHAN'S DECISION TO MAKE THE VOTE AN ISSUE OF CONFIDENCE. WE HAVE LEARNED THAT LATE YESTERDAY MORNING LIBERAL LEADER STEEL WENT TO NUMBER 10 TO ADVISE CALLAGHAN THAT HIS PARTY HAD DECIDED TO SUPPORT THE CENSURE MOTION. GIVEN GOVERNMENT SOUNDINGS OF THE OTHER MINOR PARTIES, IT WAS CLEAR THAT UNLESS THE LIBERALS COULD BE PERSUADED TO WITHHOLD THEIR SUPPORT, THE GOVERNMENT WOULD LOSE ON THE CENSURE ISSUE AND HEALEY WOULD BE FORCED OUT OF THE TREASURY. CALLAGHAN DECIDED TO CONVENE A SPECIAL CABINET MEETING EARLY THAT AFTERNOON AND RECEIVED CABINET BACKING TO ANNOUNCE FORMALLY THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD REGARD THE VOTE AN ISSUE OF CONFIDENCE. THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 LONDON 09493 01 OF 02 151806Z

LIBERALS THEN DECIDED TO ABSTAIN, RATIONALIZING THIS POSITION AS BEING SUPPORTIVE OF THE GOVERNMENT (I.E., IT WOULD NOT BE OPPOSING). GOVERNMENT BUSINESS MANAGERS ALSO SOUGHT TO OBTAIN SUPPORT FROM THE OTHER MINOR PARTIES, PARTICULARLY THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS, BUT SUCCEEDED ONLY WITH THE 3 WELSH NATIONALIST (PLAID CYMRU) MPS WHO AGREED TO ABSTAIN IN RETURN FOR A PROMISE THAT THEY WOULD BE CONSULTED ON GOVERNMENT PLANS TO EXCLUDE LOW INCOME FAMILIES FROM INCOME TAXATION. IN THE EVENT, THESE ABSTENTIONS WERE ENOUGH TO ALLOW THE GOVERNMENT TO WIN.

3. COMMENT: THE NARROW MARGIN OF THE GOVERNMENT'S WIN WAS CLEARLY A POLITICAL VICTORY FOR MRS. THATCHER, AND ONE SHE PROBABLY HAD NOT COUNTED ON WHEN HER PARTY DECIDED TO PUT DOWN THE CENSURE MOTION. SHE ALSO SUCCEEDED IN EMBARRASSING THE LIBERALS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE LIBERALS' DECISION NOT TO GO INTO THE DIVISION LOBBIES WITH THE GOVERNMENT WAS BASED LARGELY ON THAT PARTY'S PIQUE OVER HEALEY'S BEHAVIOR IN HIS EARLIER CONSULTATIONS WITH THEM ON THE BUDGET. STEEL SUBSEQUENTLY LOOKED VERY UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN TRYING TO RECON-

CILE HIS PARTY'S ABSTENTION WITH ITS PACT COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT ON CONFIDENCE ISSUES. IT WAS, HE SAID, AN INCIDENT HE HOPED BOTH THE GOVERNMENT AND THE LIBERALS COULD PUT BEHIND THEM. THE PLAID CYMRU VOTES, WHILE NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE GOVERNMENT IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, PROVIDED A USEFUL BREATHING SPACE AND

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PAGE 01 LONDON 09493 02 OF 02 151800Z
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 09493

WERE OBTAINED AT LITTLE REAL COST. THE SNP DECISION, ON ANY RATIONAL GROUNDS, WAS INEXPLICABLE. A GENERAL ELECTION AT THIS TIME WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY COST THEM SEATS SO THEIR ACTION CAN BEST BE SEEN AS AN ACT OF POLITICAL BRINKSMANSHIP.

4. THE OUTCOME OF THE CENSURE VOTE MAY SUGGEST THAT CALLAGHAN'S PARLIAMENTARY POSITION IS WEAKER THAN WE BELIEVE IT TO BE. CLEARLY, THE LIBERALS AND THE SNP WOULD BE BADLY HURT BY A GENERAL ELECTION NOW, AND WHILE THERE IS NO ASSURANCE THAT THEIR FORTUNES WILL IMPROVE OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, THERE IS ALWAYS THAT CHANCE. THE ULSTER UNIONISTS TOO WOULD SEEM WELL ADVISED TO WAIT UNTIL LEGISLATION INCREASING NORTHERN

IRELAND'S PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION IS ON THE
STATUTE BOOKS BEFORE KICKING OVER THE TRACES. BUT
THEN THEY HAVE NEVER BEEN NOTED FOR THEIR POLITICAL
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PAGE 02 LONDON 09493 02 OF 02 151800Z

PERSPICACITY. IRONICALLY, ONLY THE PLAID AMONG THE
MINOR PARTIES WOULD SEEM TO RISK LITTLE IN AN EARLY
ELECTION -- THEIR SHARE OF THE WELSH VOTE SEEMS TO BE
HOLDING UP, THOUGH TWO OF THEIR THREE SEATS ARE CON-
SIDERED MARGINAL. FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT, CALLAGHAN
STILL SEEMS REASONABLY SECURE FOR THE BALANCE OF THIS
PARLIAMENTARY SESSION. LAST NIGHT'S VOTE, HOWEVER,
ILLUSTRATES THE KIND OF PROBLEMS HE WOULD FACE IF HE
TRIED TO CARRY ON INTO ANOTHER SESSION OF PARLIAMENT
WITHOUT SOME KIND OF AGREEMENT WITH ONE OR MORE OF THE
MINOR PARTIES. IT MUST THEREFORE BE REGARDED AS
ANOTHER FACTOR THAT WILL IMPEL HIM TOWARD A GENERAL
ELECTION THIS FALL.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ELECTION RESULTS, VOTE OF CONFIDENCE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 15 jun 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978LONDON09493
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780250-1020
Format: TEL
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780656/aaaabwkj.tel
Line Count: 194
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 6a986088-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 LONDON 9405
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2341119
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CALLAGHAN SURVIVES CONFIDENCE TEST
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK, (CALLAGHAN, JAMES)
To: STATE USEEC MULTIPLE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/6a986088-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014